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Grand Challenges, Feminist Answers

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Abstract

Feminist organization theories develop knowledge about how organizations and processes of organizing shape and are shaped by gender, in intersection with race, class and other forms of social inequality. The politics of knowledge within management and organization studies tend to marginalize and silence feminist theorizing on organizations, and so the field misses out on the interdisciplinary, sophisticated conceptualizations and reflexive modes of situated knowledge production provided by feminist work. To highlight the contributions of feminist organization theories, I discuss the feminist answers to three of the grand challenges that contemporary organizations face: inequality, technology and climate change. These answers entail a systematic critique of dominant capitalist and patriarchal forms of organizing that perpetuate complex intersectional inequalities. Importantly, feminist theorizing goes beyond mere critique, offering alternative value systems and unorthodox approaches to organizational change, and providing the radically different ways of knowing that are necessary to tackle the grand challenges. The paper develops an aspirational ideal by sketching the contours of how we can organize for intersectional equality, develop emancipatory technologies and enact a feminist ethics of care for the human and the natural world.

Keywords

climate change, emancipation, feminist ethics of care, feminist organization theories, inequality, intersectionality, technology

Introduction

Feminist organization theories have a remarkable track record in the broader field of management and organization theories. Three decades

after the first systematic theory of gendered organizations, (Acker, 1990, 1992), feminist thinking and theorizing on organizations have developed into a pluralistic and mature

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interdisciplinary field, with continuous debates among a transdisciplinary community of scholars, activists and practitioners. Gender theory is part of feminist theory, but not all gender theory is feminist in the sense that feminist organization theories always entail a critique of the existing distribution of power in organizations, in society and in knowledge production. Feminist organization theories take issue with dominant frameworks in management and organization theories that centre on objectivity and neutrality, economic rationality and business performance. Their agenda does not stop at critical analysis and deconstruction of management and organization studies orthodoxies. They take the next step to develop alternative value systems, emphasizing that organizations are situated in wider social systems and bear responsibility for social justice, equality, solidarity and care for others. They are committed to material and social change in organizations and societies in line with those values. To do so, feminist organization theories challenge and politicize ways of knowing and knowledge production and envision alternatives to these processes. Feminist organization theories are therefore always political and performative (Calás & Smircich, 2006), harbouring an agenda beyond theoretical contributions and a commitment to change organizations. The main goal is to trouble power relations, imagine better worlds and work to achieve them (Ferguson, 2017, P. 283).

In a recent paper, Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, and Tienari (2020) distinguish three overlapping modes of feminist research: (1) as a conceptual frame to address specific topics; (2) as an empirical phenomenon of specific feminist types of organization or organizing; and (3) as a methodology for producing knowledge. The first mode of feminist research is the most common mode and can be recognized in the wide variety of feminist perspectives that inform an evenly wide variety of organization theories, from entrepreneurship (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009; Verduijn, Dey, Tedmanson, & Essers, 2014) to new institutional theory (Kenny, 2013), and technology and innovation (Schiebinger &

Schraudner, 2011), from communication (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Buzzanell, 1994), and corporate social responsibility (Grosser & Moon, 2019), to power and resistance (Thomas & Davies, 2005), to name but a few examples. The second mode tends to focus on explicitly feminist and/or women's organizations often linked to the feminist movement (Grosser & McCarthy, 2019; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019; Weatherall, 2020). While the current popularity of feminism (Lewis, Benschop, & Simpson, 2017) brought a renewed interest in the principles of feminist organizing such as collectivity, solidarity, equality, care and social justice, this remains such a radical challenge to the principles of capitalist business organizing that it is deemed more exotic than an alternative to vested business models. The third mode of feminist theory which insists on the reflexive, ethical and political dimensions of knowledge production is rare, but it is what makes feminist theory a 'dangerous knowledge'. Unapologetically, feminist theory goes against the dominant epistemic culture in management and organization studies and positions knowledge as political and personal (Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, & Tienari, 2019). This dominant culture with its alleged 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' of knowledge has strategically concealed its gendered nature, as well as the power relations that determine what counts as knowledge (Calás & Smircich, 2006; Gherardi, 2011; Jones, Martinez Dy, & Vershinina, 2019).

It is not therefore self-evident that the contributions of feminist theorizing are recognized and appreciated, mainstreamed, or even known in management and organization theories. Feminist work gets easily marginalized, isolated, even ghettoized (Harding, Ford, & Fotaki, 2013). There is often opposition against it, and intellectual and political attacks are commonplace (Verloo, 2018). There is resistance to feminist epistemologies and methodologies, and resistance against the content and ideas (Van den Brink, 2015). The success of feminism (Walby, 2011) notwithstanding, most theories of organizations remain silent about gender, ignoring how gender is one of the fundamental

organizing principles (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). There are politics of knowledge at work that exclude feminist knowledge as a legitimate source for understanding organizations and organizing, keeping it in a niche out of existing epistemic regimes, mainstream debates, and off the pages of prestigious academic journals (Bell et al., 2019, 2020; Jones et al., 2019).

With theories being performative in the sense that they constitute our social realities, and transform social norms and institutional and organizational arrangements (Pullen, Lewis, & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019), the exclusion of feminist theories that unpack and delegitimize inequalities in organizations is problematic. What is required, I argue, is a more profound engagement with and thorough integration of the sophisticated theories, conceptualizations and reflexive modes of situated knowledge production that feminist theories have to offer. As challenges for contemporary organizations are not confined to disciplinary boundaries either, our theorizing about these challenges and how to deal with them should be moving beyond existing boundaries. As I aim to demonstrate in this paper, feminist organization theories navigate the crossroads of different disciplines and rethink the processes and practices of knowledge production, necessary for impactful new theories to emerge.

Previous overviews of feminist organization theories have highlighted the contributions that multiple strands of feminist thinking make to organization theories (Benschop & Verloo, 2016; Calás & Smircich, 1996, 2006). Here, I take a different, more thematic approach to discuss the feminist answers that are being developed to what arguably are three of the grand challenges of our times: inequality, technology and climate change. Grand challenges are significant, yet solvable problems that require novel ideas and unconventional approaches to unravel their complexity and advance social progress (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016). These grand challenges transcend organizations and adversely affect societies and individuals, yet organizations play an important role, both in creating and maintaining the

problems and in providing possible solutions. The three challenges of inequality, technology and climate change represent areas of key importance for organizations and society, and they have already been theorized from feminist perspectives. Inequality in organizations is a basic grand challenge for organizations, because it makes visible on which grounds decisions are made about the division of labour, opportunities, rewards, benefits and work pleasures. The legitimacy of those grounds is called into question when today's globalized workplaces are characterized by employment segregation, marginalization and the oppression of workers at multiple intersections of gender, race, ethnicity and class. Technology constitutes a grand challenge because technological innovations and artificial intelligence rapidly change the nature of work and the workers. Climate change poses a grand challenge for organizations, because ecological sustainability requires a fundamental rethinking of the relations between organizations and the environment, humans and nature. The argument for all grand challenges is that feminist theorizing provides novel ideas and unorthodox approaches to change, coming from its track record in understanding multilevel complexity and articulating alternative ways of organizing. Feminist theories challenge and politicize ways of knowing and knowledge production (Moosa & Tuana, 2014), and imagine fundamentally alternative ways of knowing. Without attention to feminist theories, I argue, organization theories and theorists will not be able to fulfil the social responsibility that makes for better science and better strategies for tackling these grand challenges.

In line with the feminist ethos of situated knowledge and embodied scholarship, I want to acknowledge that I am writing this from the privileged position of a white, tenured, cis-gender woman professor working in a Dutch school of management. My intellectual, political, institutional and geographical locations and background bear influence on how I see developments and priorities in the field, with my viewpoint being inevitably incomplete and selective. Having worked my entire academic life on

gender and power in the workplace, I have had the pleasure to see the field flourish, despite counterforces of global capitalism, neoliberalism in the academy, and postfeminist gender regimes. I have also seen how the transformative potential of feminist theories has been obstructed in the field of management and organization by restrictive dominant understandings of what counts as ‘proper’ theorizing and knowledge. I hope that the mission of this journal to be a truly open and inclusive space for theory development across the entire breadth of the field (Cornelissen & Höllerer, 2019) can stimulate the necessary conversation about the politics of knowledge, and can give the credits that are due to feminist thinking about organizations and organizing.

Feminist Theories of Inequality in Organizations

The grand challenge of inequality concerns how organizations contribute to the growing social and economic inequalities in society as organizations provide opportunities, security and income to some and not to others. Whereas mainstream organization theory upholds the myths of neutrality and efficiency of organizational structures, and rationality and meritocracy in organizational practices of hiring, promoting and rewarding employees (Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020), feminist theories explain how social categories function as core principles of organizing. Social categories structure the division of labour along lines of gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and dis/ability and their intersections (Bendl, Bleijenbergh, Henttonen, & Mills, 2015; Kumra, Simpson, & Burke, 2014). Feminist work develops rich and complex theorizations of the many ways in which organizations produce and reproduce social inequalities at different levels of analysis; from opportunities, tasks and wages, to jobs, careers and professions, and from networks and sectors to countries, regions and cultures.

Below, I first zoom in on a conceptual repertoire on redistribution and recognition, inequality regimes, and intersectionality which

feminists have developed to address inequalities in organizations. Next, to interrogate how contemporary capitalism produces inequalities in organizations across the globe, I zoom out to gendered inequalities as theorized in postcolonial and decolonial feminism.

Redistribution and recognition

The power processes producing economic and social inequalities and their intertwining have always concerned feminists. There is a long track record of compelling feminist critique of what counts as work and gets rewarded in patriarchal forms of capitalism and, relatedly, who counts as a valuable worker. Feminist theories problematize material, economic inequalities and emphasize the need for a redistribution of resources, for example in the feminist debates on the dominance of paid work and the marginalization of unpaid reproductive work, on the comparable worth of allegedly masculine and feminine work and skills (England, 1992) and on the gender wage gap (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2018). At the same time feminist theories target social inequalities, taking issue with the symbolic gender order and discursive representations that value masculinity over femininity in organizations (Gherardi, 2014).

Fraser (2009) argues that under the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ struggles for the redistribution of socio-economic resources became subordinated to struggles for recognition of identity and difference. The result is a dangerous liaison of neoliberal capitalism and corporate feminism (Eisenstein, 2005) in which capitalist market values create equal opportunities, empower women and women accordingly need only to ‘lean in’. Through the concept of post-feminism, this cooptation of the feminist agenda is analysed as a selective and restrictive uptake of particular feminist values such as choice and agentic self-determination (Lewis et al., 2017). Representing women as individualist, entrepreneurial women who make their own choices and embrace full responsibility for their own lives and careers (Rottenberg, 2014) lacks, however, a systems-wide critique and may in

fact undermine struggles for the redistribution of pay and opportunities. Indeed, advocates of a paradigm that encompasses redistribution and recognition at the same time urge us to move away from the postfeminist dominance of individual choice, empowerment and responsibility and return to a necessary critique of inequalities in structures and systems, involving a feminism for the 99% (Fraser, Arruzza, & Bhattacharya, 2019).

Socialist feminist work has inspired organization studies to look at the detrimental effects of gendered and classed divisions of labour, emphasizing the systemic and structural dimensions of inequalities in capitalist organizations (Benschop & Verloo, 2016). It shows how historically subordinated social groups are associated with devalued competences and precarious jobs (Kalleberg, 2009) and how invoking abstract ideals of meritocracy, quality and leadership reproduce and conceal the privilege of historically dominant groups at work (Scully, 2002; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012a). It also theorizes the power and agency of marginalized women workers, and how they craft ways for micro-emancipation. For instance, a study of migrant women tourism workers from Central and Eastern Europe working in hyper-exploitative employment relations (Rydzik & Anitha, 2020) conceptualizes agency as practices of resilience, reworking and resistance against exploitation. Migrant women are not represented as powerless victims of discrimination but instead recognized as active agents who employ different repertoires of coping with precarious work. Yet, the authors well note the limits of individual agency to combat structural inequalities, and call for collective action and the support of trade unions to aid the necessary redistribution of power.

Inequality regimes

In a recent review of the organizational reproduction of inequality, the authors note that ‘while we have a good understanding of who suffers from bias and disadvantage in organizations, we have much less appreciation of the

mechanisms that allow inequalities to persist’ (Amis et al., 2020, p. 4). Feminist theory, however, offers rich contributions that do show how power processes produce gender inequalities through formal and informal organization processes and patterns of everyday interaction which at first glance seem gender neutral yet reflect and maintain a gendered order in which men and particular forms of masculinity dominate (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p. 590). The notion of inequality regimes, especially, is an example of a distinctly feminist conceptual frame. It bridges theories of patriarchy and capitalism, insights from critical race studies that theorize the intersectionality of race, class and gender (Crenshaw, 1989), and insights on the organization of power relations in organizations (Acker, 2006). Inequality regimes are defined as the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations (Acker, 2006, p. 441). Inequalities in organizations are

the systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions, such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations. (Acker, 2006, p. 443)

Classed, gendered and racialized inequalities are produced in the formal and informal organizing processes that are used to achieve organizational goals and characterize daily organizational life; processes of organizing work into jobs and hierarchies, recruitment and hiring, wage setting and supervisory practices, and informal interactions at work. Inequality regimes are maintained through direct control in the shape of bureaucratic rules, rewards or coercion and through indirect control in the shape of monitoring technologies, restricting information, or restricted employment opportunities. Acker (2006) also points to internalized control, which refers to beliefs in the inevitability of inequalities, the invisibility of inequalities *as* inequalities and the legitimacy of privilege.

These indirect and internalized modes of control underscore the normalization and institutionalization of inequalities in the workplace (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011).

For example, the work on inequality regimes in the public sector shows how gendered, racialized and classed inequalities persist even in the public sector with extensive equality and diversity policies, because these policies are constantly at risk of being undermined by informal work cultures and workplace interactions (Healy, Bradley, & Forson, 2011).

Intersectionality

Delving deeper into the intersections of class, gender and race, feminist intersectional theory offers an influential framework for understanding the persistence and complexity of inequalities in the workplace. Intersectionality as a concept arose from pioneering work in black feminist scholarship and has gained prominence in the study of multiple inequalities (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2017). It refers to how social categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and dis/ability are inextricably interconnected in the production of equality and inequality, privilege and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1997). There is a growing consensus across disciplines that paying attention to intersectionality is crucial to analyse manifestations of inequality in their full complexity, as single-axis thinking undermines knowledge production as well as struggles for social justice and equality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Choo & Ferree, 2010). Race, class and gender are the core inequalities that have been at the centre of this strand of scholarship, but intersectionality has also been studied in connection with sexuality, age, dis/ability and other axes of inequality.

Organization studies were relatively late in their uptake of intersectionality, and thus in understanding how gender, class and race are simultaneous processes of identity, as well as intricately linked to institutional and social practices in organizations (Holvino, 2010). In

their overview of intersectionality in contemporary studies of work and organizations, Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher, and Nkomo (2016) note how most studies on intersectionality in organizations focus on the experiences, narratives and identities of individuals and groups in diverse occupations, sectors and contexts. This allows for theorizing the experiences and identity work of hitherto marginalized groups of black, migrant and ethnic minority women in organizations (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Atewologun, Sealy, & Vinnicombe, 2016; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Essers, Doorewaard, & Benschop, 2013). Yet, there is a critique here as well that the focus on intersectional identities tends to de-radicalize intersectionality and keeps it from engaging with systemic inequalities or wider systems of oppression and domination (Dhamoon, 2011). An emphasis on intersectional identities runs the risk of getting caught up in identity politics, attending to multiple differences but without addressing economic power inequalities and ignoring the call for social justice that fuelled the conception of intersectionality in black feminist scholarship in the first place (Liu, 2018).

There is a promising second approach to intersectionality which transcends such an identity focus and does question the systemic power dynamics which arise from the institutionalization of systems of inequality (see, e.g., Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Intersectional thinking of this kind pluralizes feminist organization theories in different ways. For example, Ferguson (2017) points to the importance of indigenous thinking as a necessary component of intersectional feminist analyses of colonial relations. Intersectionality brings histories, politics, cultures and economies in a globalized capitalist world into focus, showing how available subject positions are limited and systems of inequality in organizations are reproduced in different parts of the world. It inspires epistemological reflexivity and invites the production of knowledge from locations in the global South, to include the theorizing based on the world views, experiences and material conditions of indigenous

and non-Westernized women (Connell, 2019; Mohanty, 1988, 2003).

Postcolonial and decolonial feminism

Feminist thinking about inequalities in the workplace has contributed to a far more complex picture of the impact of globalization; challenging global/local, North/South and West/Rest dichotomies and connecting it to the sexuality, gender, politics and ethics of organizations (Andrijasevic, Rhodes, & Yu, 2019; Desai & Rinaldo, 2016). For example, Berry and Bell (2012) show how intersections of class, race and gender influence whether someone is constructed as elite 'expatriate' or as marginalized 'migrant' in the international management literature. In empirical and theoretical work, feminist perspectives examine the gendered effects of globalized capitalism on working relations, employment conditions and labour market status in different parts of the world. Notions such as the 'gendered global assembly line' (Bair, 2010) and the 'global care chain' (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, & Kay, 2003) bring into focus the geopolitics of global supply chains at the expense of the young women migrating from rural areas to work long hours for minimal wages in global manufacturing in Latin America and South East Asia (for instance, see Alamgir & Banerjee (2019) on the garment industry in Bangladesh), and the women migrating to work as nannies and maids in richer countries, often leaving their own children and elders to be taken care of by unpaid care givers (Herrera, 2013; Kim, 2017). The feminization of these particular types of work is often explained by low wages and legitimized through stereotypes of docile women and essentialist ideas about women's suitability. As already outlined above, while such studies document how women are subjugated to abusive and exploitative work relations, they also show women's agency and highlight their strategies to negotiate and resist marginalization.

Disciplinary and geographical differences notwithstanding (Bhambra, 2014), postcolonial, decolonial and anti-colonial feminist

scholarship offers sophisticated conceptual instruments to interrogate the continuing economic, political, social and cultural effects of colonialism and the deep embeddedness of colonial relations in contemporary global workplaces. Feminists working with theoretical notions such as subalternity (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Spivak & Said, 1988), othering (Prasad & Prasad, 2002), hybridity (Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006) and representation (Nkomo, 2011) analyse and subvert the complex intersectional patterns of power and privilege, oppression and marginalization in the working lives of women as well as men. This work furthermore shows how it is not an easy task to problematize the hegemonic production of knowledge in the North and search for alternative representations and multiple histories without falling into culturalist essentialism.

To summarize, this section has illustrated some of the riches of feminist theories in relation to the grand challenge of inequalities in organizations. It has shown that feminist work is indispensable to make inequalities visible and acknowledged. It has also shown how feminist theories develop knowledge on the complexities of privilege and disadvantage across multiple intersecting social categories in today's globalized workplaces, and how these theories politicize that knowledge, siding with those who bear the burden of patriarchal and capitalist systems. Given this state of affairs, I see two important items on the research agenda for this particular grand challenge: first, to keep track of multiple manifestations of intersectional inequality; and second, to imagine possibilities for changing inequalities. New avenues for research concern the strategies and interventions to effectively counter the complex inequalities and promote equality in today's workplace. Current thinking goes some way in sketching the roads to change, but more work is needed to face the grand challenge of actually *changing* inequalities. I suggest that one possible way forward is to think about interventions in terms of their contribution to intersectional equality, which builds on the concepts of inequality regimes and intersectionality discussed in this

section, combined with a capabilities approach (Woods, Benschop, & Van den Brink, 2021). Intersectional equality is a normative goal and framework that can guide and direct decisions to promote equality in organizations. Achieving intersectional equality requires profound and systemic change in patriarchal capitalist organizations, but with the increasing recognition of the ethical, social and environmental crisis of neoliberal capitalism, the time is now ripe to push for such change. As argued in the introduction, organizations may be as much part of the solution as they are of the problem, when they can be changed to become a central site for interventions towards intersectional equality.

Feminist Theories of Technology in Organizations

The second grand challenge for which there are feminist answers is technology. Technology in terms of machinery, artefacts, tools and techniques to get work done is one of the grand challenges for contemporary organizations. Technology has many faces from industrial technologies, information and communication technologies (ICT), healthcare and reproductive technologies, to digital innovations, domestic technologies, robotics and artificial intelligence. Technological developments evolve fast, reconfigure working times and spaces and make for dramatic shifts both in how work is done and in terms of who is doing the work. The sociotechnical intertwinement of technology and society makes technology a grand challenge for organizations. Mainstream management and organization theories tend to focus on the instrumentality of technology for organizational performance, seeing it as enabling people to do their work faster, more innovatively and effectively, or as a way to dislocate workers (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). Feminist theorizing addresses this grand challenge in a distinctive way, developing knowledge on the defining role of social categories in the design, implementation and use of technologies in organizations and society at large. Feminists emphasize the mutual shaping

of technology and gender – in its intersections with other social categories – over time and across multiple sites (Wajcman, 2010).

The interdisciplinary feminist theories of technology call attention to three focal interests. First, there are relatively straightforward questions about representation, referring to the (non) participation of women and men in different technologies, and about the displacement of gendered jobs by technology. Second, there is critique of dominant frameworks representing technology and technological artefacts as neutral and impartial innovations, deconstructing technology as gendered. And third, feminist work interrogates how technology can be mobilized to undo gender inequality, by problematizing the boundaries between body and mind, human and machine, and idealism and materialism.

Women in technology

Traditionally, technology is stereotypically associated with white men, building on constructions of technology as a strength of men, and emphasizing men's technological prowess (Cockburn, 1983). Feminists have long unpacked such stereotypes, drawing attention to the technological proficiencies women obtain through their engagement with everyday technologies in the household and the workplace, as well as in the digital sphere with, for example, social media (Rogan & Budgeon, 2018). Nevertheless, the underrepresentation of women in the information science, engineering and technology sector is persistent and well documented (see for instance Kelan, 2008; Kenny & Donnelly, 2020). It means not only that men continue to dominate engineering work, computer science and hi-tech entrepreneurship (Wellner & Rothman, 2020), but the underrepresentation of women in technical designs also profoundly affects how the world is made, as every aspect of contemporary life is touched by sociotechnical systems. As Wajcman puts it, 'unless women are in the engine rooms of technological production, we cannot get our hands on the levers of power' (Wajcman, 2004, p. 111).

The impact of advanced automation, robots and artificial intelligence is now felt in all nooks and corners of the labour market, within low-skilled occupations and high-skilled knowledge work alike. Technology and digitalization are not restricted to male-dominated sectors but have entered female-dominated sectors such as healthcare as well. The care–tech link, for instance, illustrates how care and technical work intersect in health care occupations, with medical and nursing models of care increasingly merging (Lindsay, 2008, p. 348). Women’s jobs in these and other sectors are even more at risk of technological displacement due to their overrepresentation in jobs with routine tasks that are prone to automation (Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, & Khalid, 2019).

Yet, the concerns about a dystopic future of unprecedented technological unemployment because of the alleged superior performance of intelligent machines are somewhat tempered by techno-feminist work. Scrutinizing the performance of robots and algorithms, this body of work shows that they only go some way: empathetic robotic care for the elderly, and bias-free and non-discriminatory algorithm decisions are still far away. Cute, wide-eyed robots cannot replace the social and emotional labour women give in complex care work, and algorithms notoriously bear the values and biases of their elite white male developers in Silicon Valley, reproducing their discriminatory practices (Wajcman, 2017). The core message is not the reassurance that sophisticated human work cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence, but that technology is not just happening to an innocent, gender-neutral society. Feminist work of this kind highlights how there is nothing inevitable about the way technology evolves and is used, as technology is deeply social, cultural, political and economic, and it is our own social practices that produce inequalities through technologies (Wajcman, 2015).

Technology is gendered

This brings us to the second issue of how technologies are gendered. Feminists have

theorized how intersectional gender relations materialize in technological tools and techniques, rather than such artefacts being neutral or value-free (Wajcman, 2010). Theorizing the genderedness of technology helps to directly address the grand challenge of technology as it deconstructs the sociomaterial and affective dimensions of technology, developing a body of knowledge that can potentially be used to construct technologies differently.

Feminist analyses of sociomaterial dimensions of technological artefacts have shown how artefacts such as electric shavers, cars and watches are classed and gendered by design and use (Oudshoorn, Saetnan, & Lie, 2002). The human tendency to gender machines is particularly evident for robots, with more humanoid robots becoming more gendered (Søraa, 2017), and robots in turn falling victim to gender stereotypes based on their appearance or voice (Eyssel & Hegel, 2012).

The gendering of machines is also apparent in domestic artificial intelligence products such as Amazon’s Alexa, Apple’s Siri and Microsoft’s Cortana. These feminized devices respond to voice commands to do various domestic labour tasks, from setting alarms and keeping personal schedules for multiple family members, to playing one’s favorite music, suggesting recipes and ordering food. In the words of Daniel Sutko, ‘the ideal AI performs like the misogynist fantasy of a docile female subject: caring, nurturing, responsive, attentive, helpful but not willful, smart but not overly so, replaceable, customizable, available’ (Sutko, 2020, pp. 17–18). Marxist feminist analyses show how domestic digital technologies are shaped as ‘digital housewives’ or ‘social servers’, reproduce a racialized and gendered division of domestic labour, and make formerly invisible reproductive work visible to bring it under capitalist control (Jarrett, 2015; Schiller & McMahon, 2019). Through the feminization of these domestic digital devices, increasingly affective and intimate data exchanges are invited; Alexa and Siri allow the companies that produce them to learn and monitor intimate details about users’ activities, tastes

and personal lives, contributing to surveillance capitalism in the home (Woods, 2018). Importantly, these feminist theories foreground affective dimensions of technologies and digitalization, pointing to the manipulation and exploitation of affective economies and affective transactions (Ahmed, 2004). The intensification of affect in digital organizations serves economic value (Just, 2019) and profit-driven patriarchy (Bergen, 2016).

The feminist deconstruction of gendered technologies raises important questions about the complex relations between technology and power, privacy and capital, gender and media (Woods, 2018) that advance discussions on technology in management and organization studies. Here, feminist theorizing reveals the conservative politics of most technology discussions, by showing how contemporary technologies tune in to a patriarchal status quo rather than transform intersectional gender relations.

Emancipatory technology?

The third core issue of feminist theories of technology highlights the potential emancipatory effects of technology and digital media by examining their ability to undo gender inequalities and/or transform intersectional gender relations. Here, there is some optimism that the virtuality of the internet allows women and non-binary people to escape embodied inequalities, empowers them to shape their own identities online, and participate in technology on their terms. The Stitch'nBitch movement, for instance, of women meeting offline and online in activist, cyberfeminist knitting communities, is analysed as a phenomenon in which the production and consumption of gender, technology and society collide and exemplifies a new materiality (Minahan & Cox, 2007).

Critically questioning and blurring the boundaries of dichotomies is, as mentioned, a core characteristic of feminist thinking, and in the field of technology it takes on the boundaries between human and non-human, organism and machine, body and mind, femininity and

masculinity. With tools such as queer theory, assemblage theory and work on the performativity of gendered subjectivity, feminist technology studies can examine how gendered subjectivity is co-produced with technology in multiple forms, instead of presupposing that gender and sexuality are done in predetermined binary ways (Landström, 2007). Another theoretical notion for transcending traditional binaries is the cyborg. Donna Haraway in her famous manifesto presents cyborg feminism, the hybridity of machines and humans and the blurring of boundaries, as part of 'the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender' (Haraway, 1987, p. 3). The attention for cyborgs foregrounds the body, a core feminist theme, emphasizing that the intersection of bodies with technology reworks both nature and culture, providing opportunities for women. Cyborgs serve as figurations of posthuman identity, calling attention to the sociomateriality of the body and to possible new forms of gendered embodiment (Balsamo, 1996). The emancipatory hopes for cyborgs cannot always be substantiated though, as they can also reproduce rather than change hegemonic power relations (Muhr, 2011). Cyborg feminism calls for new relations between humans and technologies in the intersectional boundary projects of AI and gender.

To summarize, this section has highlighted how feminist theories of technology shed light on dimensions of technology that remain mostly silenced elsewhere. The sophisticated concepts and insights about how sociomateriality, affect and embodiment shape and are shaped by gendered technologies, digitalizations and AI, disrupt mainstream tales of impartial innovation and utilitarian progress. They show how the grand challenge of technology is inevitably also a political struggle over intersectional gender inequalities in organizations and one that potentially can be done differently. The implications of this work are that the dominant classic binaries in the field of technology oftentimes become denaturalized and delegitimized and are increasingly recognized as technology's gender troubles (Sutko, 2020). This feminist unpacking of the politics of technology can be

seen as a necessary first step, to be followed by other, thought-provoking steps such as the design and implementation of alternative, emancipatory technologies. It may be that current power relations in organizations make it unlikely to 'expect our AI systems to become feminist' (Wellner & Rothman, 2020), but that is exactly what is needed. Feminist technological knowledge and relational modes of knowledge production need to be moved from the margins to the centre if we are to develop future technologies that emancipate and can contribute to intersectional equality.

Feminist Theories of Climate Change Challenges to Organizations

The final grand challenge for organizations to be discussed here is climate change. Climate change constitutes an existential challenge for organizations and societies, even threatening the possibilities of human and non-human life on the planet. Yet, businesses tend to respond to urgent and increasing ecological crises of global warming, extreme weather, rising sea levels, pollution, extinction and animal-borne diseases by sticking to a business-as-usual approach (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Critical approaches to corporate environmentalism and sustainability show how a business case approach, which values sustainability efforts in terms of their contribution to the bottom line, remains the dominant frame for organizations. This is ineffective in making change as it reduces 'nature' to something to be managed, reproduces gender inequalities and reinforces a dominant logic of patriarchy (Irving & Helin, 2018; Phillips, 2019).

Climate change is also inherently a feminist issue (Zoloth, 2017). Feminist theories challenge the reduction of climate change to an environmental scientific problem, showing how rational, technological and scientific solutions for mitigation or adaption do not suffice, making the case for an affective, moral and political project instead (Bee, Rice, & Trauger, 2015; Gaard, 2015). This section of the paper sets out

to show how feminist theories of climate change offer a rich conceptual vocabulary for rethinking crucial relations between organizations and the environment, humans and nature.

Eco-feminism is the background for contemporary feminist theories of climate change. The term was coined in the 1970s, discredited as essentialist (equating oppressions of 'woman' to oppressions of 'nature') in the 1990s, but regained momentum in today's ecological crises by connecting intersectional feminist and ecological theories and activism (Gaard, 2011; Plumwood, 2004). There are rich varieties of eco-feminism corresponding to different feminist philosophies and politics, going by alternative labels among which feminist environmentalism, queer ecologies, gender and the environment, or gender and climate change (Warren, 2000). From this rich variety, I discuss three core themes in more detail below. The first is the critique of global capitalism and how it produces intersectional inequalities, whereas the second critique involves general dualisms in Western thought. The third goes beyond critique and concerns feminist theorizing about an alternative for climate justice, and the organizational responsibility for climate governance grounded in a feminist ethics of care.

Capitalism critique

The first theme is developed within an interdisciplinary critical feminist scholarship which interrogates climate change as an intersectional gendered, classed and racialized phenomenon, inextricably connected to global capitalism, with differential impact on inequalities in different parts of the globe. The notion of gendered vulnerabilities, that always intersect with race, ethnicity and class, is developed to analyse how climate change (re)produces contextualized social inequalities in global capitalism. Prompted by feminist scholars studying gender inequalities in the South, these analyses show how the material burden of climate change primarily falls on poor women and children in developing countries in the global South, who need to work harder to secure food, water and

energy due to climate-induced resource scarcities (Pearse, 2017). Vulnerabilities to climate change are connected to broader social, economic and cultural inequalities, such as those related to colonial histories and consumer capitalism (Pearse, 2017). While it is important to document vulnerabilities of the women and men on the front line of climate change, feminist work makes an effort to refrain from victimizing. It also highlights the situated knowledge, agency and resilience of women and men in their responses and adaptations to climate challenges (Moosa & Tuana, 2014).

Drawing theoretical connections between feminism, capitalism and ecology is seen as a promising route to challenge the structural connections between gender oppression, environmental destruction and capitalism. Combining insights from Marxist eco-feminism and material eco-feminism, Oksala (2018) problematizes the logic of capitalist accumulation and its dependence on the exploitation of women's reproductive labour and the extraction of natural resources without compensation. She argues that the environment and women's reproductive labour have intrinsic value that cannot be fully monetized and commodified in the capitalist market economy, and that we need an economic system with market regulation, a fair distribution of resources, and room for values other than profit or growth (Oksala, 2018, p. 231).

Deconstructing dualisms

The second theme of eco-feminism is the problematization of how Western thinking is based on interrelated dualisms such as human/nature, mind/body, masculine/feminine, and reason/emotion (Phillips, 2014). The deconstruction of binary oppositions is a defining element of feminist thought, as it shows how binaries are also hierarchies, laying the foundation for a social ordering that is strictly separated and in which one side is superior and dominant and the other side is inferior and oppressed. In eco-feminism, a fundamental insight is that the culture/nature dualism in Western thought is gendered, because men and masculinity are associated with culture

and culture is valued, whereas women and femininity are associated with nature and both are devalued (Gaard, 2011). One of the few feminist organizational thinkers, Mary Phillips, notes how 'the ecofeminist project offers a means to think through and hence to challenge the ways in which nature *and* bodies, emotion and femininity are constructed and marginalized by a masculinist logic predicated on instrumental rationality' (Phillips, 2014, p. 455).

Eco-feminism addresses the power implications of such dualist separation and emphasizes the interdependency and integration of the elements instead (Irving & Helin, 2018; Plumwood, 1993). Humans are seen as an integral part of ecosystems just as any other life form. This idea connects to posthuman feminist theory, calling into question androcentric assumptions of human exceptionalism and species hierarchy (Braidotti, 2016). New materialist feminisms do not stop at the boundaries of human embodiment, however, but question the impact of climate change on other species. The concept of transcorporeality is used in material feminism to emphasize 'the physical fact of our co-constituted embodiment of humans with other flows of life, matter and energy' (Gaard, 2015, p. 25). Here, we see the use of a relational ontology that deconstructs the category of human, repositions humans away from the centre in ecosystems, and addresses the human exploitation of other species and their non-human nature (Gaard, 2015). Such a relational ontology is not yet commonplace in the realm of organizations, where we see that all too often, corporations instrumentalize and rationalize nature in 'a political economy that privileges wealth accumulation at the expense of environmental destruction' (Ergene, Banerjee, & Hoffman, 2020, p. 4). Feminist economists develop theoretical notions such as social provisioning (Power, 2004) and social reproduction (Bakker, 2007), offering radically different perspectives to the use of natural resources and the unpaid care work of women, by focusing on the everyday practices of sustaining material life, connections between humans and non-humans, and their wellbeing in organizations (Ergene, Calás,

& Smircich, 2018). Feminist approaches help to meet the grand challenge of climate change by decentring both humans and organizations, repositioning them in wider ecosystems, in ways that disrupt their hegemonic power.

Ethics of care

This brings us to the third and final theme to be discussed here which concerns feminist philosophical challenges of the normative frameworks for climate justice and responsibility. In contrast to a neoliberal climate governance with its reliance on individual action and behavioural choice, feminist climate justice emphasizes that a systemic redistribution needs to be realized through the collective coordinated action of organizations and governments (Bee et al., 2015). A feminist climate ethics foregrounds relationality, obligation, responsibility, solidarity and care, and as such is inspired by the moral agency in the feminist ethics of care perspective (Gilligan, 1982). It starts from concrete situations and lived experiences of climate change, reflecting on what it means to live a good life and care for the world (Allison, 2017).

A feminist ethics of care requires a relational self, embedded in community, and an ability to engage with a concrete other, taking responsibility and acknowledging what we owe this other (Moosa & Tuana, 2014; Zoloth, 2017). In the relational ontology of an ethics of care, the relation between humans and the environment is a reciprocal relation, with humans responding to the climate, and the climate being affected by us at the same time. Phillips (2019, p. 1161) argues that caring offers a way of being in the world in which meaningful, compassionate and attentive relationships with nature, humans and non-human others can be built. She warns that care does not provide easy solutions, and that putting care in the centre requires a fundamentally different humanity, and a fundamentally different organizing of relationships too. Eco-feminism emphasizes values of compassion, care, empathy and love for the living world in recognition of relational caring obligations and a working justice for all (Allison, 2017).

Overall, this section shows how feminism is not just another approach to think about climate change as a challenge for organizations, but it involves a radical shift for organizations and organizing as we know it through conventional theories and forms of scholarship (Bell et al., 2020). As most insights notably come from feminists working in the philosophical, economic and geography disciplines, there is a pressing need for feminist organization theories to similarly take on board this interdisciplinary work and bring them into the conversation about how to change the role of organizations in climate change. Again, organizations are a huge part of the problem, but they can also serve as an inroad into solutions. I argue that feminist organization theories on climate change are thus uniquely situated to theorize the relations and tensions between economic, social and ecological responsibilities of organizations. Numerous research gaps remain in this area (Grosser & Moon, 2019) and if there ever was an urgent research agenda for feminist organization theorists, it is here and now.

Concluding Remarks

This paper set out to discuss the feminist answers to three grand challenges for organizations: inequalities, technology and climate change. It has shown that feminist theories have a lot to offer to management and organization theories both through critique of dominant frameworks and through the articulation of alternative conceptualizations and value systems. While certainly a heterodox body of work, feminist theories on these grand challenges share concerns about the perpetuation of complex intersectional gendered inequalities at multiple levels of analysis. The significance of this work is that it moves away from comfortable abstractions of ‘actors’ or ‘stakeholders’ and calls attention to the lived realities of concrete Others who, at multiple intersections of class, gender, race and ethnicity and at multiple geopolitical locations, deal with the dark sides of globalized supply chains, technological replacement and environmental destruction. In addition, it shows that inequalities

are not inevitable, but are rather the consequence of particular capitalist and patriarchal forms of organizing.

This has far-reaching consequences for how the problems of grand challenges are framed and tackled. Previous suggestions in organization studies to address grand challenges refer to participatory architecture, multivocal inscriptions and distributed experimentation (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). These offer important insights by calling for participation of multiple actors, interpretative viability (Benders & Van Veen, 2001) for key interventions and a process of iterative learning. But they also still call on abstract actors, and prioritize traditional managerial and design solutions, which brush over the power inequalities that are revealed by feminist theorizing. With Audre Lorde's wisdom in mind that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, the challenge is to imagine and craft other tools. Feminist work makes it 'clearer that there are options for an economy and ecology beyond what is permissible to say and do as knowledge in management and organization studies under advanced market capitalism' (Ergene et al., 2018, p. 222). Even without a fully articulated answer on how we can organize for intersectional equality, develop emancipatory technologies and enact a feminist ethics of care for the human and the natural world, to have them as aspirations can and should make a difference in the practices of organizing.

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